

Sermon for 21.10.18 Isaiah 53.4-12; Ps 91.9-16; Hebrews 5.1-10; Mark 10.(32-34) 35-45

To put this gospel in context, it takes place when Jesus is leading his disciples towards Jerusalem and the fate that awaits him there. Let's imagine the scene. There is Jesus slightly out in front of a crowd who follow him. He is leading the way – and he stops, takes the disciples aside to tell them about what awaits him in Jerusalem.

He communicates to them in detail that in Jerusalem he will be handed over to the chief priests; he will be condemned by the priest and be handed over to the Romans. He will be mocked, spat at, scourged, executed and then raised on the third day.

Now this little talk with the disciples about his fate is actually the third time that Jesus has shared this prediction with them.

Our gospel story today picks up the story with James and John's response to what Jesus predicts.

They ask if they can sit by his side in glory. It is clear that they haven't heard what he has said – they are concerned with themselves and their personal glory. Jesus responds to them by telling them that they don't know what they are asking. Are they able, he asks, to drink the cup that he will drink? Can they be baptised with the baptism that he has been baptised with? They reply in the affirmative, Yes they can. Jesus tells them that they will one day be able, but not yet. The other disciples are indignant towards James and John when they find out what they have requested – and judging by Jesus response- not so much because of the nature of the request but rather because they had been the first to ask about the positions of glory.

Donald English writes about the response of the disciples; "What is clear is that the greater the pressure upon them from the fateful journey they are now taking, the more the twelve settle into discussion of their own greatness and status. Their focus turns inward to their self-obsession and we see clearly that they all fail to grasp the scale of the self-renunciation that is involved".<sup>1</sup>

This seems to be a common trait of the human condition – and I'm sure many of us can remember times when we have turned inward to our own concerns when a friend or relative is sharing their own pain with us.

What is clear in the gospel story is that the disciples have allowed their own concerns to overshadow the reality that being a disciple is not all about glory, but rather demands suffering and that leadership in Jesus' community means service. They have not grasped that Jesus identifies himself with the suffering servant in Isaiah – scripture that they would have known well and our first reading today.

When we read this gospel passage, we may have negative feelings of frustration with the disciple's lack of perception and understanding. I know that it astounds me. Yet there is a positive side to this. We do see James and John's faith and honesty in their request to Jesus, however naïve it may have been and also faith and honesty in the other disciples in their expression of indignation. And with our forward knowledge of what happens to them after Pentecost we do see that the one who made the deaf to hear and gave sight to the blind, can in time transform even those who are now as James and John once were – that is- self-obsessed.

I believe that if Jesus is followed in faith and honesty, then confusion and even denial can be driven out by wisdom, fear by courage, pride by humility, rivalry by collaboration, and self-ambition by a self-giving love. There is, therefore, hope for all us yet. Such is the life giving power of the community of love in our Trinitarian God.

I'd like now to offer a little exercise in which I invite you to take a few seconds to imagine the Risen Jesus leading you along the path down to Jerusalem – to your own Jerusalem experience. Let us

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<sup>1</sup> Donald English, *The Message of Mark*, (Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester), 1996, p181

imagine that he stops, turns to us and tells us what awaits us there in our own suffering and dying and rising –in our own experience of transformation. How do we respond?

Do we say in all faith and honesty – that yes we want to be led into where we need to go to become whole and more like him? Or do we say that there is no need for us to go there for we are comfortable how we are?

Well our response could be either, or it could be just plain *NO* or like James and John and about self-obsession.

The wonder is, such is the love of God for us, that whichever way we respond in faith and honesty, the Holy Spirit will wait for us to recognise and accept our need and then walk with us through our suffering and death to arrive at our rising. All we need is to be present to God in our daily life.

It is a refreshing reality of contemporary theology in this era that we are returning to the way to be present to God in the art of contemplation. The way of resting in the love of God with open hearts, ears and minds as a natural part of our daily life. In past eras, it was the way many of the mystics and saints lived.

Rowan Williams, in his address to the Roman Synod of Bishops in 2012 pointed out that to learn contemplation is to learn what we need so as to live faithfully, truthfully, honestly and lovingly in Christ. He said that contemplation is very far from being just one kind of thing that Christians do; it is the key to prayer, liturgy and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom – freedom from self-oriented, acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that comes from them. To put it boldly, according to Williams, contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit. It is a deeply revolutionary matter.<sup>2</sup>

The slow moving prayerful life gives us the time and space we need to be present to God in quietness where we are open to the divine love of the Trinity ever present internally and externally.

May we join the contemplative revolution and be ready and equipped for the service to which we are called.

The Lord be with you.

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<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams address to the Roman Synod of Bishops in 2012.